

## The Saudi Arms Deal

### An Element of US Policy in the Face of the Iranian Threat

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On August 13, several reports appeared in the US media on plans by the Obama administration to sell arms to Saudi Arabia valued at \$60 billion over a period of ten years. The reported deal is supposed to include 84 F-15S jets, approximately 60 AH-64D Apache Longbow assault helicopters, and about 70 UH-60 Black Hawk utility tactical transport helicopters. The deal will also include simulators, upgrades for existing fighter jets, and training and maintenance packages.

Contacts for the deal were conducted secretly due to Saudi sensitivity. At the same time, however, there were hints that the deal would not include equipment items that could arouse serious opposition on the part of Israel, such as long range precision guided air-to-surface missiles.

These reports are preliminary only, for at this stage what is involved is the administration's unofficial notification to Congressional committees that handle arms sales. According to US law, an arms sale obliges official notification to Congress, which is authorized to halt the deal within 30 days of receiving notification. Such official notification has not yet been sent, but is expected to be submitted to Congress upon its return next month from the summer recess.

The deal falls within the framework of a policy announced by President George W. Bush in July 2007, which intended to approve a large scale sale of arms to member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). On the one hand, the arms sales are meant to strengthen the resilience of Gulf states in the face of major threats, i.e., Iran, while serving as a tool to enlist those states' support for US policy against Iran. On the other hand, the arms sales might to a certain degree remove the burden from the US armed forces of defending the Gulf. President Obama's administration has continued and even expanded this policy.

In announcing this policy, President Bush talked about arms sales in the amount of \$40 billion (\$20 billion to Saudi Arabia and \$20 billion to the other Gulf states). Since then, contracts totaling billions of dollars have been signed with some Gulf states – Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. However, no deal on a similar scale has yet been signed with Saudi Arabia. This is not to say that Saudi Arabia has not purchased American weapons. Up to now official requests have been sent to Congress for a large number of deals to purchase new weapons and upgrade existing weapons, together amounting to approximately \$4 billion. However many of these requests haven't yet matured into signed contracts (see table) and the current total of signed contracts amounts to about half the above sum (most of it in a contract to purchase armored vehicles for the Saudi Arabian National Guard - SANG).

Even if notification of the deal is submitted to Congress, it would constitute only a first stage in the process, followed by a long phase of negotiations over details such as specific items of equipment, prices and payment terms, supply dates, scope of maintenance and training packages, etc. Numerous notifications to Congress on intentions to sell weapons ultimately fall

through. Negotiations such as these are likely to continue for several years, with the subsequent supply phase also lasting several years.

Several comments on what the deal appears to be:

- a. While the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait preferred investing most of their money in defensive equipment (mainly air defense and anti-ballistic missile defense systems), the Saudi deal is for aerial attack equipment (fighter jets and assault helicopters).
- b. The F-15S jets mentioned in the reports cannot be considered new or unfamiliar equipment. Saudi Arabia had already purchased F-15S jets in the early 1990s. The F-15S jet is a Saudi-adapted version of the 72 F-15E jet (the Strike Eagle, whose Israeli version is the F-15I Thunder jet). No new version of the Boeing F-15 is currently being produced, although the manufacturer recently revealed its proposal for a substitute for the F-35 with a model known as the Silent Eagle that includes certain stealth features. However this proposal still has not entered any development stage. Therefore, if the current deal is realized, it will include jets that are not very different from those already in the hands of the Royal Saudi Air Force.
- c. This is also the case regarding helicopters mentioned in the reports. Since the early 1990s, Saudi Arabia deployed 12 AH-64A helicopters; about two years ago, Saudi Arabia requested the sale of 12 AH-64D helicopters. It also requested an upgrade of its old helicopters to a similar standard. Dozens of UH-60 helicopters are also in service, and a number of these have been ordered recently. Therefore the deal apparently involves increasing the number of types of helicopters already at the disposal of the Royal Saudi Air Force.
- d. The Saudi air force has recently begun to absorb the Typhoon jet. Saudi Arabia purchased 24 of them from Great Britain, with an option to purchase another 48 jets. This is a huge deal valued at \$7–9 billion. In order to have the contract signed, Britain's prime minister was forced to order the halting of the corruption investigation concerning this deal and previous arms deals with the British BAe weapons firm.

For many years the Saudi air force has been operating parallel arrays of American-made and British-made fighter jets. Typhoon jets will be flying alongside Tornado jets (both the interceptor and the attack models). These old jets will not be retired from service. Rather, the Typhoon deal includes overhauls and upgrades to these jets.

If the purchases are realized, it would involve a considerable expansion of the Saudi air force, particularly its fighter jet component. This will oblige the training of manpower on a considerable scale, even if as in the past, the Saudis will rely on a maintenance and training apparatus almost entirely based on foreign workers employed by foreign contractors. It is doubtful whether Saudi Arabia, where military service is not compulsory, will be able to man this expansion.

## Conclusion

In recent years Saudi Arabia has ordered weapons on a considerable scale, both from the US and from other countries. The country's capabilities in purchasing and absorbing weapons systems on such a large scale are limited. The likelihood that Saudi Arabia would be ready to invest money on such a large scale is low.

Hence the gap between the submission of requests to Congress by the administration and contracts that are actually signed. Especially conspicuous is the fact that aside from the Typhoon deal, the largest signed deal was for refurbishing equipment of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, which King Abdullah headed before ascending to the throne and remains close to his heart. The National Guard role has more to do with protecting the existing regime than defending against any external threats.

More than a Saudi initiative, then, the announcement of the sale is compatible with the policy of the Obama administration – to strengthen the defensive capability of US allies in the Gulf in the face of the Iranian threat.

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